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## Conspiracy Theories

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## Conspiracy theories

Jovan Byford

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### Introduction

Any attempt to understand antisemitism and its persistence in modern society would be incomplete without engagement with the topic of conspiracy theories because much of contemporary antisemitism takes the form of a conspiracy theory. Animosity towards Jews is today seldom expressed in terms of demeaning stereotypes that defined racial antisemitism in the past, or as routine ‘dislike’ of Jews or disapproval of their culture or religion. Instead, the biggest ‘fault’ of Jews in the eyes of antisemites worldwide is their possession of considerable wealth, power and influence, which they use to control democratic governments, international organizations, financial institutions, media corporations and cultural establishments. For those affiliated with the Right, Jews represent an omnipotent force with almost supernatural powers, intent on the destruction of independent nations and the creation of a secular, Jewish-controlled, New World Order. Sections of the Left, on the other hand, see Jewish elites as united in a powerful Israel/Zionist/Jewish lobby that pulls the strings of western politics and controls the mass media.

The connection between antisemitism and conspiracy theory manifests itself also in another, possibly less obvious way. The idea of Jewish power persists as a latent motif in a sizeable proportion of contemporary conspiracy culture. Of course, not all conspiracy theories are necessarily antisemitic; there are many that, while being farfetched and ludicrous, are, at least in terms of ethnic or religious prejudice, relatively harmless. In fact, since the end of WWII, exponents of conspiracy theories, especially those with mainstream pretensions, have often sought to distance themselves from the idea of a specifically *Jewish* plot. The most common arch-villains of contemporary conspiracy theories are organizations such as the Bilderberg Group, or vague entities such as the ‘creators of the New World Order’, or the shadowy elite within the American establishment. Yet, discernible within many of these contemporary, seemingly non-antisemitic conspiracy narratives, are worrying, and often very subtle, allusions to Jewish involvement. This means that just as conspiracy theories are an important dimension of contemporary antisemitism, so antisemitism remains a regrettable, and persistent, ingredient of the conspiracy culture.

In this chapter, we will explore the longstanding connections between conspiracy theories and antisemitism and explore why the two phenomena are so inextricably and unavoidably linked. We will start by looking at what conspiracy theories are and where they come from.

## What are conspiracy theories?

The term ‘conspiracy theory’ describes explanations which presume that a historical or political event (or series of events) occurred as a consequence of a carefully worked out plan, plotted in secret by a small group of powerful individuals. Although such explanations may focus on different conspiratorial bodies – the Illuminati, Jews, Communists, the US government, etc. – they are permeated by the same fundamental claim: there is ‘an occult force operating behind the seemingly real, outward forms of political life’ (Roberts, 1974: 29-30), and that visible reality is no more than an illusion, a smokescreen that conceals the sinister machinations of some powerful, secretive and menacing cabal.

But conspiracy theories involve more than just the claim that events in history are the outcome of collusion or a secret, and evil, plot. Conspiracy theories are complex and alluring stories, characterized by a common *rhetorical style*. Anyone who has had the opportunity to engage with conspiracy theories about 9/11, the causes of AIDS or the machinations of the Bilderberg group, the Illuminati or Jews will be struck by the fact that they often sound remarkably alike. Tales of conspiracy – whether expounded in Washington, London, Moscow, Tehran or Beijing – and regardless of whether they purport to explain a war, a political assassination, the cause of a disease or a financial crisis, are marked by a distinct thematic configuration, narrative structure and explanatory logic. When describing the conspirators, their nefarious plan, and the means of mass manipulation through which they keep their endeavors secret, or when presenting evidence to substantiate the conspiracy claims, conspiracy theorists resort to a number of recurring motifs and tropes (see Byford, 2011). American historian Richard Hofstadter (1967) referred to the common features of the conspiracy theory as markers of a distinct explanatory or rhetorical ‘style’ which he chose to call ‘paranoid’. He employed the term *style*, ‘much as a historian of art might speak of the baroque or the mannerist style. It is, above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself’ (ibid.: 4). For similar reasons, conspiracy theories are said to constitute a distinct culture, which encompasses a system of knowledge, beliefs, values and practices shared by communities of people around the world (Barkun, 2006).

The uniformity of the conspiracist ‘style’ of rhetoric can be shown to persist over time. The language of contemporary conspiracy culture bears a close resemblance to that found in the writings of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century conspiracy theorists; it draws on the same armory of arguments and tropes and, as we shall see, writers today will often recognize the enduring relevance of the work of their predecessors. This thread of continuity that runs through conspiracy theories is sufficiently robust to make it possible to speak of a *tradition of explanation* (Billig 1978, 1987a), made up of a corpus of ideas, arguments, ‘facts’, ‘revelations’ and ‘proofs’ pertaining to the alleged world plot, which have accumulated over time, and which are reused, refined, expanded and applied to new circumstances by successive generations of conspiracy theorists.

## Where do conspiracy theories come from?

When tracing the origins of the conspiracy tradition, it is tempting to look back to the stories of plots and intrigues that defined both real life politics and religious mythology of ancient Athens and Rome, or at the ‘cloak and dagger’ political culture of the medieval, or Early Modern period. One might also seek the origins of specifically antisemitic conspiracy theories in the medieval Christian anti-Jewish demonology which perceived Jews as Christ-killers, sorcerers, poisoners of wells and murderers of children (Trachtenberg, 1983). In other words, it sometimes seems that conspiracy theories are as old as human society itself.

But conspiracy theories of the kind discussed in this essay are of more recent origin. They date

back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, when, shortly after the French Revolution, a number of authors such as John Robison and Augustin Barruel, wrote lengthy treatises attributing the causes of this dramatic historical event to the machinations of secret societies, including the Freemasons and the Illuminati. These post-revolutionary conspiracy theories differed from those that existed beforehand in several important ways. Until then, tales of political conspiracy were confined to fairly specific intrigues and plots among powerful figures of the day, who were said to be motivated by financial or political gain. By contrast, the conspiracy theory about the French Revolution was preoccupied with the actions of mysterious secret societies whose composition, political character and modus operandi were shrouded in mystery (Cubitt, 1989). More importantly, conspirators were no longer seen as working for personal benefit. The alleged plot was not limited either temporally, by the length of the conspirators' term of office, political career or life, or spatially by their finite sphere of influence. The Illuminati plot was seen as timeless, and had the destruction of the social order and established way of life as its ultimate aim. Conspiracy became seen as the motive force in history, accounting for any event, past, present or future.

Up until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, most conspiracy theories focused on the machinations of secret societies, especially the Illuminati and the Freemasons. Occasionally, writers alluded to these organizations as 'puppets manipulated by Jews' (cited in von Bieberstein, 1977), but this view was not dominant. This changed around the 1850s, when the wave of liberal reform in Europe led to the granting of full citizenship and property rights to Jews. The emancipation of the Jewish community provoked a bitter reaction across the continent, especially from conservative forces. Nationalist writers and publishers, or traditionally conservative clerical authorities in Germany, France, Russia and elsewhere, turned their attention to Jews as the ultimate sinister force that pulls the strings of politics. They mistakenly and tendentially concluded that, because Jews benefited from the values of liberalism, secularism and the Enlightenment, they must have been instrumental in their creation and dissemination (Poliakof, 1974).

Antisemitic conspiracy theories which emerged in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century drew on many of the medieval stereotypes about Jews, and as such continued the longer tradition of Jewish demonology which permeated Christianity throughout the middle ages. Yet they also modernized the medieval anti-Jewish tropes, adapting them to the modern age of secular politics. For instance, in the Middle Ages, Jews were seldom seen as a malign force in their own right; they were despised and feared as the 'spawn of Satan', his agents on earth, and 'a diabolic beast fighting the forces of truth and salvation with Satan's weapon' (Trachtenberg, 1983: 18). By contrast, in the world of 19<sup>th</sup> Century *political* conspiracy theory, Jews became the would-be masters, a source of *secular* power that used money, influence and arcane knowledge to subvert traditional values and institutions, promote atheism and turn people into slaves. Nevertheless, traces of the medieval myths persist in contemporary conspiracy culture, in the form of the obsession with the conspirators' esoteric, occult powers, which they supposedly use to manipulate the masses. For instance, radio show host Alex Jones mixes the motif of financial and political influence of secret societies, Wall Street or the 'military industrial complex' with the claims of ritualistic 'human sacrifices' and satanic practices, which echo the medieval blood libel myth.

The notion of a Jewish quest for world domination occupied a central place in conspiracy theories for almost a hundred years, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth Century. Its popularity peaked in the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Anxieties provoked by the threat of communism made the public in Europe, North America and elsewhere in the world susceptible to the conspiracist notion that turmoil in Russia in 1917, just like the French revolution and the events in-between, was orchestrated by a network of clandestine forces, among which Jews played a prominent role. The

popularity of these theories are best illustrated by the success of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the notorious antisemitic pamphlet and proven forgery, which supposedly revealed the aims of the ongoing Jewish plot, and outlined the means by which world domination was to be achieved. Originally published in Russia in 1903 *Protocols* were later translated into most languages of the world and millions of copies were sold. In the period between 1920, when it acquired international fame, and the defeat of Nazism in 1945, *Protocols* were outsold world-wide only by the Bible (Cohn, 1967).

After WWII, however, the prominence of antisemitic conspiracy theories diminished. Once the Holocaust made it impossible to champion the idea of a Jewish conspiracy with the same degree of openness as before (Poliakov, 1974, Billig 1978), attention was turned to the maneuverings of organizations such as the Council on Foreign Relations or the Bilderberg Group (Lipset and Raab, 1978, Billig, 1978). In many ways, conspiracy theorists returned to their roots, and created a 20<sup>th</sup> Century variant of the secret society mythology, with some new protagonists, but old aims and methods. This post-war transformation illustrates well the fluid and dynamic quality of conspiracy theories which accounts for their persistence. Because purveyors of conspiracy theories have always been surrounded by sceptics and subjected to criticism and ridicule, anticipating and reacting to potential or actual charges of irrationality, paranoia or prejudice has become an essential feature of any conspiracy narrative. This drives the conspiracy tradition of explanation to evolve, so as to remain pertinent, and politically acceptable, in response to changing social and political circumstances.

### **The thread of antisemitism**

At first sight, a distinction can be made between the New World Order-style conspiracy theories of the kind one encounters in high-street bookshops or on syndicated radio shows and the openly antisemitic ones which, at least in the west, are today largely confined to the margins. The former have a more ‘reasonable’ appearance and they do not identify an ethnic group as being in control of organizations plotting world domination. In fact, most conspiracy theorists with mainstream pretensions – e.g., Allen (1972), Robertson (1991), and Marrs (2000) – go out of their way to distance themselves from antisemitism, arguing that those who continue to peddle the notion of Jewish conspiracy are only discrediting the important work into the machinations of the ‘real’ would-be rulers of the world.

However, while it might be possible to make a *theoretical* distinction between the two sorts of conspiracy theory, in practice the boundaries can be blurred. The conspiracy theorist is operating in an ideological space with a long antisemitic legacy that cannot be easily discarded (Byford and Billig, 2001). This legacy usually resurfaces when the conspiracy theorist seeks to situate the present political situation in a broader historical context.

The past is an essential feature of any conspiracy theory. It would be implausible for a conspiracy theorist to argue that a present-day plot is historically isolated. For example, one cannot convincingly claim that until the Bilderberg group was founded in 1954, things happened by chance, while since then everything has been the result of a conspiracy. Or that the 9/11 attacks as ‘the mother or all conspiracies’ was a singular, unprecedented event. A conspiracy theory is a view of the world not only as it is at present, but also as it always was. Specific plots need to be, and invariably are, imagined as links in a longer chain of conspiracies.

When locating current plots and schemes within the centuries-long line of conspiratorial activity, conspiracy theorists seldom set out to write the history of the conspiracy from scratch. Instead, they draw on the work of other conspiracy theorists: they refer to, cite and quote established sources within the conspiracy culture. This reliance on the work of other conspiracy theorists is not the result of intellectual

laziness or lack of creativity. It is necessitated by the conspiracy theory's inherent problem with proof. Writers of conspiracy material are accountable for the claims they make, yet, by definition, they deal with imperfect evidence: they are concerned with matters that are inherently secret and that the most powerful forces in the world are, supposedly, working hard to suppress. Conspiracy theories can, therefore, never offer incontrovertible proof for their claims. As was stated in an editorial published in the 1970s in the British far-right publication *Spearhead*, 'if such a degree of proof was available, there would no longer be a conspiracy' (cited in Billig, 1978: 309).

To address the tricky issue of evidence, conspiracy writers tend to interpret the world around them through the work of other conspiracy theorists, past and present, and invoke their authority as a substitute for direct proof. After all, the main criterion for a successful conspiracy theory is its acceptance by the wider community of conspiracy enthusiasts, who will judge it, among other things, according to how knowledgeable the author appears to be of the canonical works of the genre. This tendency to regurgitate old arguments and tropes and apply old ideas to new circumstances is why conspiracy theories so often sound alike.

This feature of conspiracy theories is important in relation to conspiratorial antisemitism. As was already noted, between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century and the end of WWII, antisemitism was the dominant motif in conspiracy theories. Much of the conspiratorial literature of that period, but also *about* that period, revolves around the idea of a Jewish conspiracy. This means that, when authors today reflect on the history of the plot – a task that, as we have seen, requires them to recognize the relevance of past conspiracies and past conspiracy theories – they invariably come into contact with the antisemitic legacy of the conspiracy culture. A look at a couple of tropes ubiquitous in contemporary conspiracy literature illustrates the links between the seemingly non-prejudicial conspiracy theories and their less palatable, more antisemitic variants.

The first trope concerns the causes of the Russian Revolution of 1917. It is today virtually impossible to find an elaborate account of the conspiracy theory that does not allude to the hidden causes of the revolution and allege that a group of American bankers bankrolled Bolshevik revolutionaries. This motif is regarded as common sense by leading conspiracy theorists (Jim Marrs, Pat Robertson, David Icke, Alex Jones, etc.) and among contributors to countless conspiracy websites world-wide.

At first sight, there is nothing antisemitic about the claim that American bankers financed the Bolsheviks. Those who make it will seldom present it as a *Jewish* conspiracy, or even discuss the identity of the bankers involved. However, a different picture emerges when one examines more closely the *sources* for this claim. For instance, in Jim Marrs' bestselling book *Rule by Secrecy* (2000), the five-page section in which the true origins of the Russian Revolution are 'exposed' includes citations of seven sources, most of them books by other conspiracy theorists. Among them is the today largely forgotten work *Czarism and the Revolution* by Arsene de Goulévitch (1962). Marrs identifies de Goulévitch as a particularly important source, given that, as a Russian, he was an eyewitness to 'the early days of Bolshevism' (Marrs, 2000: 192). What Marrs omitted to mention, however, is that de Goulévitch – his key 'witness' – was a White Russian general and antisemitic campaigner who fled to Paris after the revolution, where he campaigned against 'Jewish propaganda'. His book *Czarism and the Revolution*, originally published in French in the 1930s, attracted interest from far-right circles in the US and Britain after a translation was published in California in 1962 (see Billig, 1978). In de Goulévitch's writing (unlike in Marrs'), the revolution is presented as the complot by Jewish bankers. In fact, the main source for de Goulévitch's claims, which Marrs indirectly reproduces, was the writings of Boris Brasol, the man who brought the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to the United States.

Marrs is by no means an exception when it comes to citing such discredited sources. In the writings of most other popular conspiracy theorists of today, one is never far away from de Goulévitch and other exponents of the kind of antisemitism that writers are so keen to avoid being associated with. Even when *Czarism and the Revolution* is not quoted directly, there is a reference to some other work in which the book is cited. One only needs to follow the paper trail, and usually not for long.

The second example is the ubiquity of the Rothschild family in conspiracy narratives. Ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Rothschilds, who combined Jewishness, financial wealth and international connections, have been the epitome of the international Jewish conspiracy (Barkun, 2006). The family name continues to feature in conspiracy narratives to the present day, although many writers of the post-1945 era have tended to play down their importance or avoid emphasising their Jewishness.

For example, in the works of Jim Marrs or David Icke, the ‘Rothschild organisation’ (Marrs, 2000, Icke, 1999), is seen as the pinnacle of the world plot and the sinister force behind various international organisations and secret societies. Similar obsession with the Rothschilds is apparent in Pat Robertson’s conspiracy classic, *The New World Order* (1991). For the most part, the emphasis tends to be on their wealth, business acumen and good connections, rather than their Jewishness. And yet, there are other, much wealthier and better-connected families that are completely overlooked by the conspiracy theorists. So, what makes the Rothschilds so ‘unique’? The answer lies in their history, namely the Rothschild family’s supposed involvement, in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, with a German masonic lodge. Because of this link with freemasonry, the Rothschilds embody the connection, essential to contemporary conspiracy theories, between two sources of nefarious power: secret societies and wealthy bankers (Robertson, 1991). Also, their continuing wealth and influence epitomises the persistence of the conspiracy across centuries. Crucially, the ‘revelation’ about the Rothschilds and their longstanding role in the conspiracy is not a discovery of contemporary theorists: they lifted it directly from the book *World Revolution* (1921) by the British author Nesta Webster, where the same argument is presented to connect not the freemasons and ‘high finance’, but the Illuminati and Jews. Webster herself ‘borrowed’ the argument from German 19<sup>th</sup> Century antisemitic conspiracy theorists (von Bieberstein, 1977).

These examples are representative of a pattern that permeates contemporary conspiracy culture, and illustrate how, while portraying itself as a more reasonable and sound explanation of history and politics, the post-war secret society mythology is in fact a continuation and refinement of that same tradition of explanation.

Whenever attention is drawn to the presence, in contemporary conspiracy literature, of such antisemitic motifs, coded references or innuendos, debate tends to revolve around the issue of intent and whether the authors in questions are ‘antisemitic’. And yet, it could be argued that at issue here is not the antisemitic dispositions or intentions (or the lack thereof) of individual conspiracy theorists, but the *consequence* of their work. By recognising the relevance of antisemitic works of the past and by perpetuating their message (albeit often in a coded or veiled form) the seemingly ‘reasonable’ conspiracy theories ensure the persistence of antisemitic themes and the motif of Jews as a source of sinister influence. In other words, conspiracy theories, because of their internal logic, organisation, and approach to evidence, and the way in which they are written and transmitted, find it hard to escape their own disreputable ideological and intellectual history, and remains susceptible to corruption by antisemitism.

### **Antisemitic conspiracy theories and the Left**

The conspiracy theories discussed so far have been propagated by authors aligned, for the most part, with the right-wing of politics. However, recent years have witnessed an increased awareness of a

seemingly new brand of conspiratorial antisemitism propagated by sections of the Left. The phenomenon, often referred to as ‘Left-wing antisemitism’ or ‘anti-Zionism’ is defined by the fact that, ostensibly, the central object of disparagement and animosity are not Jews as such, but Israel as the Jewish state (e.g. Hirsh, 2017). Within this view, Israel is a source of uniquely harmful influence in the world: its actions, and even its very existence, are believed to be an expression of a singularly iniquitous nationalist ideology (Zionism), which is racist, imperialist, expansionist and tyrannical. What is more, the apparent failure by the international community to deal with Israel, is attributed to the disproportionate political and financial power of pro-Israel interest groups, particularly in the West.

Before moving on to discuss antisemitism on the Left in more detail, a note of clarification is necessary. For decades, many of Israel’s policies have come under sustained criticism from individuals and organisations from different sides of the political spectrum. The state of Israel and its government have often, and quite legitimately, been called to account for the violations of the rights of Israeli Palestinians, the continuing occupation and blockade of Gaza, the building of Jewish settlements on occupied territories, the use of military force that many argue is disproportionate, for its lacklustre commitment to a two-state solution, and so on. Criticism of Israel is, therefore, not in and of itself either ‘antisemitism’ or ‘anti-Zionism’. Israel can, and should be, held up to the same standard as any other state in the world.

However, within sections of the Left, the censure of Israel is sometimes tarnished with the kind of language, and imagery, typically associated with right-wing antisemitism. As David Cesarani (2004: 72) notes, the definitive crossing of the boundary between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitism occurs at the point where it ‘intentionally or unintentionally uses or echoes long-established anti-Jewish discourse, characterising Jews inside Israel or in the Jewish diaspora as singularly wealthy, powerful, conspiratorial, treacherous and malign.’ In other words, when the argument is embellished with the motifs of a Jewish conspiracy.

The conspiracist element of Left antisemitism is most obvious in discussions about the existence and the machinations of what has become known as the Israel/Zionist/Jewish lobby. A common assumption of left-wing anti-Zionist critique is that Israel pursues the oppression of the Palestinians with the unwavering political, military, and financial support from the governments of the United States and to a lesser extent Britain, because the latter are in the grip of the menacing and all-powerful pro-Israel lobby. When the sinister influence of ‘the Lobby’ is discussed in the context of US politics, the focus of attention is principally on organisations which campaign for the interests of the American Jewish community and Israel, such as the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), or the American Jewish Committee (AJC). These are, indeed, highly influential, and effective, pro-Israel advocacy groups, albeit with somewhat different agendas and ways of functioning, which operate openly, transparently, and in accordance with US law. Yet in some of the criticism, a ‘slippage’ (Fine, 2006), or what Richard Hofstadter (1967) called ‘a leap of the imagination’ occurs, whereby disparate organisations come to be seen as parts of a single, unified all-powerful conspiratorial body, which uses its virtually unlimited financial resources to purchase political influence on an unprecedented scale and control the government, the media, and academia, and whose loyalty lies with Israel, rather than countries in which they operate.

A particularly notable example of the Lobby thesis is John Mearsheimer’s and Stephen Walt’s essay *The Israel Lobby* (2006), subsequently expanded into a 500-page book *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (2007). This much-quoted work has been instrumental in publicising - and, because of the authors’ academic credentials, legitimising - the view that the Israel lobby drives US foreign policy.



Although the authors explicitly distanced themselves from antisemitic conspiracy theories when they stated that the Lobby is not engaged ‘in a conspiracy of the sort depicted in tracts like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*’, they nevertheless suggested that pro-Israel organisations, as a unified, and malign force, have a ‘stranglehold on Congress’, exercise undue influence on public debate and popular opinion, ‘police academia’, and work against America’s national interest (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2006). Their suggestion that Jewish individuals or groups were instrumental in taking the US to war in Iraq is particularly problematic, as it echoes the rhetoric that has been used by antisemites to scapegoat Jews since at least the First World War (Hirsh, 2017).

The motif of ‘the Lobby’ is present on the British left too. In 2002, the British Labour Party MP Tam Dalyell stated that Tony Blair’s foreign policy was ‘unduly influenced by a cabal of Jewish advisers’ (Brown and Hastings, 2002). Ten years later, his fellow MP, and current leader of the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn, called for an inquiry into the influence of ‘pro-Israel lobbying groups’ on the British government. He went as far as to suggest that the influence of the Lobby goes ‘to the heart of what’s going on in the Home Office and the way the government makes decisions’ (Bright, 2012). During the 2017 General Election campaign, a pro-Corbyn group based in Bristol displayed a giant banner showing the Prime Minister Theresa May wearing Star of David earrings (Clark, 2017).

Large sections of the Left, while highly critical of Israel, downplay the role of ‘the Lobby’. Noam Chomsky (1983: 13), for example, has dismissed the insinuation that America’s support for Israel is attributable to the ‘effectiveness of the American Jewish community in political life and influencing opinion’, on the grounds that such a view overestimates the role of political pressure groups. In fact, ever since the Vietnam War, when the conflict in the Middle East came to be viewed through the lens of the broader critique of American interventionism and ‘imperialism’, a much more prevalent view within left-wing thought has been that Israel is America’s stooge, not the other way around. So, how and why does the view of Israel as America’s ‘colony’ morph, within sections of the political left, into the claim that those whose loyalty is ultimately with Israel control the levers of power in countries like the United States or Britain?

The presence of antisemitic motifs in left-wing writing cannot be explained in terms of the continuities within the conspiracy tradition that, as we have seen, are so easily discernible in the literature of the Right. Exegeses of ‘the Lobby’ theory of American politics, such as the aforementioned examples, do not situate the machinations of AIPAC within a longer history of (Jewish) conspiracy. The likes of the Rothschilds are not identified as the precursors of ‘the Lobby’, and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century classics of antisemitic conspiracy theories do not feature in the references or footnotes.

Instead, conspiracy tradition has a much more subtle and indirect influence. The century-long dominance of conspiratorial antisemitism has left behind it a rich inventory of images, motifs and tropes about Jewish financial power and questionable loyalty, which although largely ostracised from polite conversation and the mainstream of politics, nevertheless circulate in public discourse and colour the perceptions of events involving Jews. Thus, any discussion that involves Jews and political influence is vulnerable to the resurfacing of the ‘underground repertoire of stereotypes, instinctively understood by both the utterer and the recipient’, and their almost subliminal influence (Pulzer, 2003: 101). The ‘antisemitic atmosphere’ on the Left is therefore sustained not through a whole-scale endorsement of the conspiracy tradition, but by ‘the drip-drip-drip of argument, coded and implicit, clothed in allusion and wrapped in innuendo, always with a pre-emptive disavowal of any antisemitic intent’ (ibid).

This contamination by antisemitic motifs should not occur so easily, however. Left-wing thought is marked by a long tradition of opposition to racism and a standing commitment to equality and social

justice. Its contemporary exponents should therefore be more resistant to ideas traditionally peddled by their ideological opponents. And yet, among many critics of ‘the Lobby’, this sensitivity is lacking.

The reason for this lies in the fact that the Lobby narrative contains within it a premise which is essential to the overall conspiracy thesis, but which also suppresses the immunity to antisemitic tropes. It is the premise that antisemitism is less of a social problem, or threat, than the *accusation* of antisemitism, which ‘the Lobby’ uses to silence opponents and de-legitimize criticism of Israel (Hirsh, 2017). Mearsheimer and Walt (2006), for instance, called the ‘charge of antisemitism’ one of the Lobby’s ‘most powerful weapons’, used to manipulate public opinion and pursue its agenda. In the UK too, it has become common place for anyone on the Left called to book for an antisemitic remark to claim victimhood of the Lobby’s disingenuous smear campaign.

By persuading their audience, and, importantly, also themselves, that the moral standpoint from which their arguments can be criticised has been consciously imposed by ‘the Lobby’ – and is therefore an essential part of its sinister method – writers can pre-empt, destabilise and render unfounded any criticism of their ideological position. This positions ‘the Lobby’ theory of politics beyond moral reproach, removes the taboo surrounding antisemitism and reinforces the believers’ conviction in the absolute truth of their views. The belief that everything, including the definition of what is acceptable, is manipulated by the sinister lobby shields this worldview from the effects of disconfirming evidence, but also makes it vulnerable to the malign influence of motifs and stereotypes rooted in the conspiracy tradition.

## **Conclusion**

The continuing presence of antisemitic motifs in conspiracy theories propagated by the Right and the theorising about the machinations of the Israel/Zionist/Jewish Lobby by sections on the political Left are not unrelated phenomena. In sharing the motif of a Jewish plot, conspiracy theories propagated by both sides of the political spectrum are locked in a relationship of mutual reinforcement. A number of writers on the far-Right of American politics have greeted the writing on ‘the Lobby’ as a long-awaited vindication of their views and have embraced it as a convenient source of legitimacy (Hirsh, 2007). At the same time, by persevering with their often-subtle allusions to the Jewish conspiracy, writers on the Right (many of whom claim to be pro-Israel) continue to keep alive the gamut of stereotypes, motifs and tropes which will occasionally seep into the discourse of the Left, especially in response to events in the Middle East. This cooperation across the traditional ideological divides has already produced the ‘routine stereotype’ of 21st century antisemitism, namely the claim about the Jewish/Zionist dimension of the neoconservative elite in the United States and its role in taking America to war in Iraq. This motif is so prevalent today, on both sides of the political spectrum, that it is threatening to become as robust a feature of conspiracy culture as that about the Jewish origins of Bolshevism (Cesarani, 2004).

Finally, understanding the link between conspiracy theory and antisemitism which was explored in this chapter is important because it sheds light on the complex causal relationship between the two phenomena. It is often assumed that antisemitic conspiracy theories are a manifestation or rationalisation of a more basic or profound feeling of animosity and hatred towards Jews. However, as I have tried to show, this is not necessarily the case. The idea of a Jewish plot can, and often does, emerge as an unintended *consequence* of the endorsement of the conspiracy theory, a tradition of explanation and a way of seeing the world that has, for reasons examined in this essay, failed to exorcise the ghost of antisemitism from its past.

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